

## NIGER TO HOLD TENSE RUN-OFF DESPITE CHALLENGER'S ABSENCE

**NIAMEY:** With the main challenger airlifted from jail to a Paris hospital and an opposition boycott, President Mahamdou Issoufou seems certain to win re-election tomorrow in Niger, one of the world's poorest countries. Sunday's second-round ballot is the first-ever run-off in this vast African nation of some 18 million people which is increasingly facing jihadist attacks.

It pits the 64-year-old Issoufou, a former mining engineer nicknamed "the Lion", against former ally Hama Amadou, 66, known as "the Phoenix" for his ability to make political comebacks. Amadou has been forced to campaign from behind bars after being detained on November 14 on baby-trafficking charges he says are bogus and aimed at keeping him out of the race. Then just days before the vote, he was evacuated from prison and flown to Paris for medical treatment, with the government saying he was suffering from an unspecified "chronic ailment."

This unprecedented situation has sparked a govern-

ment boycott and created a tense atmosphere in the country where three-quarters of the population live on less than \$2 (1.80 euros) a day.

Niger's history is peppered with military coups and it has only had a multi-party democracy since 1990. The run-up to the first-round vote was marred by violence between supporters of the rival camps, the arrest of several leading political personalities and the government's announcement that it had foiled a coup bid.

### Unfair treatment

Issoufou, who is seeking a second term in office, took a solid lead with 48.4 percent in the initial vote on February 21, way ahead of Amadou, who scored 17.7 percent. During the campaign, Issoufou, who took office in 2011, repeatedly pledged to bring prosperity to this desolate but uranium-rich country and prevent further jihadist attacks in its vast remote northern deserts and from Nigeria's Boko Haram Islamists to the south.

Just three days before the vote, Niger suffered two jihadist attacks—one in the west claimed by Al-Qaeda's north African affiliate which killed three gendarmes and another by Boko Haram in which a senior army officer died. Although Amadou, a former parliamentary speaker, backed Issoufou in 2011, he shifted into opposition in 2013. His supporters accuse Issoufou's regime of bad governance, saying it has failed to eradicate poverty in the country.

But a clear-cut victory appears assured for Issoufou, who missed winning an absolute majority in the first round by just 75,000 votes.

He has managed to secure the support of former deputy cabinet head Ibrahim Yacouba and two other low polling candidates from the initial round.

The opposition has alleged fraud in the first round, claiming "unfair treatment between the two candidates" and has raised fears of Sunday's vote ending with a Stalinesque result. —AFP

## GERMAN EX-FOREIGN MINISTER GUIDO WESTERWELLE DIES

**BERLIN:** Former German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle, one of the country's most prominent openly gay politicians, died yesterday, aged 54, after a long battle with leukaemia, his charity foundation said. "We mourn our leader Guido Westerwelle," said his foundation on its Facebook page. "He died on March 18, 2016 at the Cologne University Clinic of complications from leukaemia treatment."

The former head of the liberal, pro-business Free Democratic Party (FDP) was diagnosed with the disease in June 2014, half a year after he left his post as Germany's top diplomat. His foundation published a photo of Westerwelle with his husband, businessman Michael Mronz, and the message: "We fought. We had the goal within our sights. We are grateful for

an incredibly wonderful time together. The love remains."

Westerwelle, a trained lawyer and gifted parliamentary debater, had been a fixture in German politics for decades, initially in opposition. Under his leadership, the FDP won just under 15 percent of the vote, its best-ever result, in 2009 elections. The FDP became the junior partner to Merkel's conservatives, and Westerwelle served as vice chancellor and foreign minister, a post he held until 2013.

Westerwelle had officially "come out" as gay at Merkel's 50th birthday party in 2004 with his partner, Mronz. At the start of his term as Germany's top diplomat, Westerwelle dismissed concerns raised in the media on whether his homosexuality could pose problems on official visits abroad. —AFP



**BERLIN:** Free Democratic Party (FDP), Chairman Guido Westerwelle, center, reacts after the German general elections in Berlin. At left is former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, front right deputy party chairwoman Cornelia Pieper. Westerwelle died yesterday. — AP

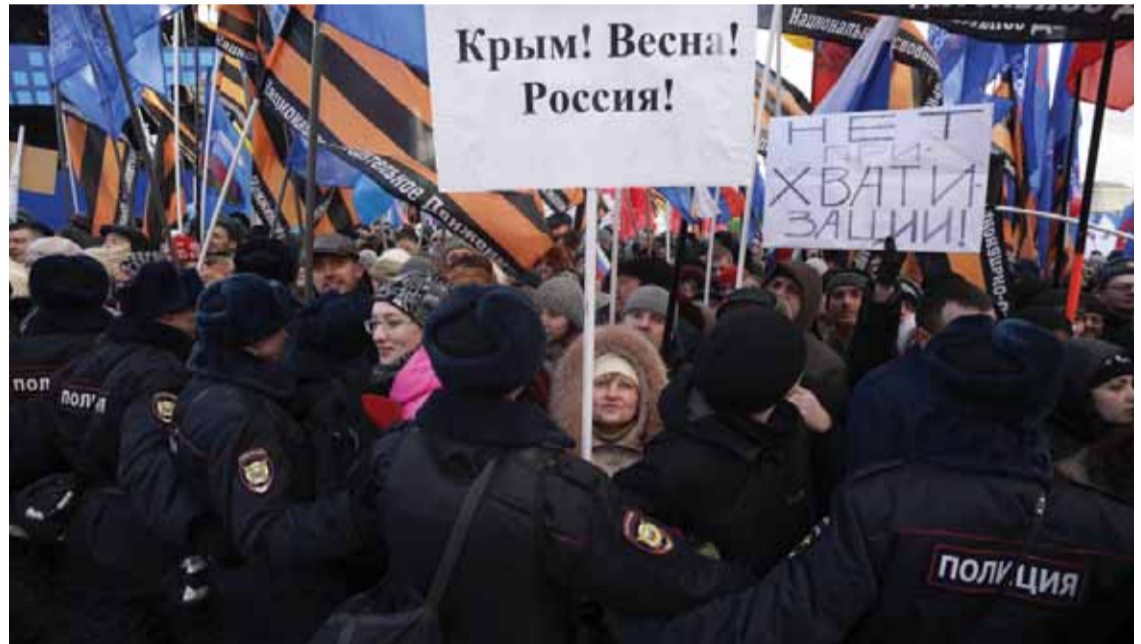
## GREEK MINISTER LIKENS IDOMENI REFUGEE CAMP TO DACHAU

**ATHENS:** Greece's interior minister yesterday likened the grim camp holding thousands of refugees on the border with Macedonia to the Nazi concentration camp Dachau. His comments came as EU leaders were meeting in Brussels to try to reach a deal with Turkey on the migration crisis. "I do not hesitate to say that this is a modern-day Dachau, a result of the logic of closed borders," Panagiotis Kouroubilis said in televised remarks from the squalid Idomeni camp.

"Whoever comes here takes several blows to the stomach," he told reporters, pledging to boost policing and medical supervision in the area.

Also Friday, a group of protesters climbed atop the Acropolis in Athens and unfurled two banners reading "Open Borders" and "Safe Passage - Stop Wars".

Solidarity protests are to be held in Greece today in main cities, part of a broader European movement to mark the United Nations' anti-racism day. —AFP



**MOSCOW:** Pro-Kremlin supporters stand behind a police cordon as they attend a rally and a concert in central Moscow yesterday to mark two years since Russia's President Vladimir Putin signed off on the annexation of Crimea in an epochal shift that ruptured ties with Ukraine and the West. The placard reads: "Crimea! Spring! Russia!". — AFP

## EU URGES COUNTRIES TO IMPOSE SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA OVER CRIMEA

KREMLIN SAYS STATUS OF CRIMEA NOT OPEN TO NEGOTIATION

**BRUSSELS/MOSCOW:** The European Union called yesterday for more countries to impose sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula two years ago, but the Kremlin said Crimea was Russian land and its status non-negotiable.

In a statement issued on the anniversary of the formal absorption of Crimea into Russia, the 28-nation EU said it was very worried about Moscow's military build-up in the region.

The EU also said it would maintain sanctions that ban European companies from investing in Russian Black Sea oil and gas exploration. "The European Union remains committed to fully implementing its non-recognition policy, including through restrictive measures," the European Council, which represents EU governments, said in its statement. "The EU calls again on U.N. member states to consider similar non-recognition measures."

The Kremlin responded by saying the issue of Crimea could not be "a matter of negotiations or international contacts". "Our position is known: this is a region of the Russian Federation. Russia has not discussed and will never discuss its regions with anyone," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a teleconference with reporters.

"In this case we should treat with respect the expression of the will of Crimean residents and the decision which was taken two years ago," he said.

Peskov was referring to Crimea's referendum on secession from Ukraine in March 2014, which was followed by a formal request from the local parliament to the Russian Federation to admit it as a new subject with the status of a republic.

On Friday Putin will visit the construction site of a bridge being built to Crimea across the Kerch Strait to connect the Russian mainland with the peninsula, Peskov added.

NATO and the EU are concerned by Russia's military build-up in Crimea, which they say is part of a strategy to set up defensive zones of influence with surface-to-air missile batteries and anti-ship missiles. As well as the EU, the United States, Japan and other major economies including Australia and Canada have also imposed sanctions on Russia over Crimea, but others including China and Brazil have avoided direct criticism of Moscow.

The 28-nation EU imposed its Crimea sanctions in July 2014 and then tightened them in December 2014, banning EU citizens from buying or financing companies in Crimea, whose annexation has prompted the worst East-West stand-off since the Cold War. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, an armed separatist revolt erupted in mainly Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine that Kiev and its Western backers said was fueled and funded by Moscow. Russia denies the charges. — Reuters